

Saint Louise de Marillac



*Co-Foundress of the Daughters of Charity
and
Patroness of All Christian Social Workers*

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By:

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Cover Art: “Elegy” (Funeral), by Karol Tichy (1871—1939) was painted in 1900. This oil on canvas painting is at the National Museum of Warsaw in Warsaw, Poland. It is not currently available for viewing. This is a faithful reproduction of a two-dimensional work of art.*



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LOUISE DE MARILLAC (1591-1660)

Although Saint Louise de Marillac was canonized in 1934, few people know anything about her. This short work is an attempt to condense a life that, for the frail and delicate woman she was, abounded amazingly in good works.

Pope Pius XII compared her work in the world with that of Saint Teresa in the cloister.

Pope Pius XI stressed the miracle of her life, the miracle of her works, and the miracle of her posterity.

Pope Saint Pius X, when proclaiming the heroic nature of her virtues, announced, "We have found the valiant woman of France."

In the eyes of the world, she was simply a young widow with wretched health and a troublesome boy. Yet, under the guidance of Saint Vincent de Paul, she inaugurated a thing never before heard of in the Church of God—performing works of charity in the world by women, women who, though not religious, aimed at the full perfection of the religious life.

BORN IN PARIS

When the fortunes of France were at their lowest ebb, and the horrors of Civil War made life unbearable for rich and poor alike, Louise de Marillac was born in Paris, on 12 August 1591.

Monsieur de Marillac worshipped his tiny daughter and tried to be both father and mother to her. However, when she was only four, he married again and little Louise soon found that her stepmother, a widow with three children of her own, had no room in her heart for the motherless babe.

Reluctantly Monsieur de Marillac sent his little daughter to a high-class Dominican boarding school at Poissy, where she was loved and understood and where she received an education rarely given to girls at that time. Besides literature and painting, she studied Latin and philosophy and read the Holy Scriptures.

Louise was happy at Poissy. She loved the peace and quiet of convent life. She loved the nuns who mothered her. She was loath to leave, when, at the age of twelve, her father withdrew her and placed her in a less expensive school in Paris.

Even then, there was to be no home life for her. In her new school, she learned domestic science and housecraft. As her father wished her to keep up her Latin, painting and philosophy, she saw much more of him, for he superintended these extras. Still it was not home and, although she found the simple life she now led more congenial, she often felt very lonely and unwanted.

Fortunately, she loved God too much to doubt His Goodness. Her loneliness drew her closer to Him and she developed a tender devotion to the Passion of Our Lord.

When her father died, two years later, her sensitive heart was crushed. He was all she had and she had lost him. Her stepmother ignored her. Although in his will Louis de Marillac wrote, "My daughter, Louise, has been my greatest consolation in life. She was given to me by God to comfort my soul in my many afflictions," he merely settled a life-income on her and named his brother, Michel, her guardian. The de Marillac family estates were inherited by her little half-sister, Innocente.

LONGED FOR THE CONVENT

For Louise, at sixteen years of age, the world held little or no attraction. Her guardian, Uncle Michel, with whom she lived after leaving school, was a most unworldly man, and his example and guidance influenced her considerably, seconding her already ardent piety and her craving for a life of penance and discipline. She soon grew to love him for his goodness and his charity to the poor and he became her first spiritual guide. She longed to enter the Convent of Capuchin nuns and made a vow to do so when she would be of age; but her delicate health made this impossible. She was heart-broken when her Confessor released her from her promise, but he consoled her by saying, "God has other designs on you."

Uncle Michel sympathized with Louise and wisely counseled her to think of something else. To get married was the only other thing a girl of the seventeenth century could do and Louise felt no attraction for it. Meantime she busied herself with the poor of her district, and with her favorite hobbies—painting and reading. She noticed that her cousins and friends, one by one, selected for themselves either the cloister or marriage. If they chose the cloister, then its doors closed behind them, because all active orders in those days were uncloistered. Many married women of her acquaintance were living in the world without being of it; so, finally she took her uncle's advice and married Antoine le Gras, the Queen's secretary, on 5 February 1613. She was then twenty-two.

In the designs of Providence, she was destined to be a model for Catholic wives and mothers.

Her husband's position entitled them to share in the festivities of the Court, but, though Louise acquitted herself of her duty and appeared at Court when custom required it, her heart was not in it.

At home with her husband, she was very happy. Antoine was about ten years older than Louise and was completely devoted to her and sympathetic regarding her work among the poor. Mademoiselle le Gras, as Louise was now called, always recalled the anniversary of her wedding with gratitude.

Towards the end of the year, Michel Junior, was born. Louise's cup of happiness was full. She showered all the pent-up love of her motherly heart on this mite. What she had missed in her own infancy she was determined to give him—full measure and flowing over—even at the risk of spoiling him. Years later, Saint Vincent de Paul gently scolded her for this saying, "I never knew a mother who was so much a mother as you. Stop worrying about your boy. God loves him better than you do and He will take care of him.

Even then, divine Providence intervened to save young Michel, by causing him to share his mother's love with others. In 1617, Louise's widowed Aunt Valence died. She had been little Michel's godmother. On her death-bed, she begged Louise to mother her seven children. Louise's small family suddenly became a large household; but so well did she manage it that the poor were by no means neglected and her servants often gossiped in the kitchen about the marvelous way she served them. How self-sacrificing she was, regardless of fatigue, inconvenience, and even dirt!

"BY THE WAY OF THE CROSS"

Sorrow pressed hard upon joy in Louise's life. In summarizing her life, she once said, "God made known to me from my earliest years that it was His Will that I should go to Him by the way of the Cross."

Loneliness in childhood, the grief of her father's death, and her disappointment in her vocation were followed by a few happy years of married life.

Then came one of her greatest sufferings—a gnawing doubt that undermined her health and happiness. Had she done wrong in getting married? Had she failed God?

Ought she leave her husband and try again to fulfill her vow of entering a Convent? Her uncle tried to allay her scruples. He then introduced her to Saint Francis de Sales, who gave her some consolation. However, in twelve months, Saint Francis de Sales was dead, but not without having asked his friend, Monsignor Camus, Bishop of Belley, who was Louise's cousin, to take over the direction of her soul. The monsignor had known her for years and understood her needs. He taught her to turn aside from thinking of her faults and fix her mind on Jesus Christ. He encouraged her work among the poor, as it made her forget herself, and he allowed her to make a vow not to re-marry if her husband died before her. After that, she had peace for three weeks. It was only a truce.

Her temptations returned with new force and she was inclined to doubt even the immortality of her soul. She prayed in her anguish to Saint Francis de Sales, confident that he would help her, and he did. On Pentecost Sunday, 4 June, she was at Mass, utterly miserable, when suddenly her mind was enlightened and all her doubts disappeared. She was made to understand that a time would come when she would take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. She saw herself in a place with others attending to the poor, but she could not understand how this could be a convent because there was so much coming and going.

Then came another cross. Antoine le Gras's health failed. He was attacked with an incurable disease. Louise hid her spiritual trials from her husband and nursed him devotedly for over two years. Resigned and conscious to the end, he died on 21 December 1625.

Immediately, the dark night of the soul descended upon poor Louise. Was her husband's death a punishment for her infidelity in the matter of her vow? Was God angry with her? Bishop Camus was away from Paris. She was desolate!

Another cross that weighed upon Louise constantly was her son, Michel. He was spoiled and she knew that she was responsible. He was now thirteen and getting nowhere with his studies because of his laziness and utter lack of ambition.

NEW SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR

Fortunately there was someone at hand to guide, enlighten and console her. Monsignor Camus, perhaps it was, who arranged for Vincent de Paul, a humble priest in Paris, to direct her. He established the Congregation of the Mission in 1625 and Louise had heard much about him. She had probably met him while visiting the

poor and she was interested in him, but she felt some repugnance in accepting him as director. Nevertheless, she acquiesced and never regretted it.

After unburdening her soul to Monsieur Vincent, she begged him to enlighten her as to her future. What did God want her to do next? He invited her to join other pious widows making, mending, and painting vestments for the church, to continue working among the poor, and (to be freer to do this work) to send her son away to a boarding school.

She drew up a rule of life for herself (a strict order of the day) and submitted it to her director. Her order of the day required her:

- To rise at five o'clock.
- To hear Mass daily and to receive Holy Communion as often as permitted.
- To make mental prayer morning and evening.
- To say the Office of Our Lady and the Rosary.
- To visit to the Blessed Sacrament.
- To have set times for reading sacred scripture, examinations of conscience, meals, recreation, and labor.

Monsieur Vincent had to modify her tendency to excessive mortification and suggested that, instead of austerities for which her frail constitution was unfit, she could restrain her too great tenderness for her son. In nothing else are you so eminently feminine, he told her.

Louise made two retreats of eight days each in the year Saint Vincent bade her pray for guidance for both of them. He kept her waiting for four years in this new and strange novitiate until God manifested His Will in her regard.

SERVICE TO THE POOR

Honoring the hidden life of the Son of God during these years, Louise occupied herself making clothes for the poor. She helped ecclesiastical students from abroad who needed clothing, books, Mass outfits, or traveling expenses. She trained young girls sent to her occasionally from Saint Vincent. Remembering Our Lord's words, "Whatsoever you do to the least of Mine, that you do unto Me," she looked upon the poor as her lords and masters and served them as she would serve the Lord of

Charity, Himself. Our Lady was her model in all things. She prepared carefully for and celebrated her feasts; especially the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption.

Saint Vincent visited her or wrote when missions kept him out of Paris, and all the while prayed that God would solve the mystery of her vocation. When he was absent for any length of time she worried and wrote to Monsignor Camus, who made light of her distress and reminded her mischievously that Monsieur Vincent could not be expected to abandon his other duties for her sake. And, his duties were legion.

When he was parish priest of Chatillon in 1617, he had erected the first Confraternity of Charity. So successful was the venture that in a short time the organization was recognized by church and state.

In 1629 there were about 130 branches in country districts and small towns. There were set rules for the members, who dedicated themselves to the service of the needy and took turns attending to the sick. To keep them up to the mark, Saint Vincent or one of his priests visited them from time to time and sometimes found that certain members had fallen away from their first fervor. Saint Vincent realized that a woman organizer with a spiritual outlook was needed for the women members. Who could fill this role? Who indeed but Louise de Marillac with her common sense, tact, and easy flow of language.

SOCIAL SERVICE WORK

Having explained the organization to her and supplied her with letters of introduction, he sent her off in high spirits, little dreaming that the social service work begun that day would one day spread over the entire world.

Traveling by open stage-coach, she visited the churches at each stopping place, to confide to the Lord of Charity, as she loved to call Him, the work she had come to do for Him. Then, she looked for lodging and took whatever was offered.

She held meetings of the confraternities, examined their organizations, visited the sick in each town or village according to instructions, and then returned to Saint Vincent with her report.

For the next four years, we find her setting off in summer and autumn, sometimes penetrating far into the country. She was appalled by the wretched condition of the peasants, and more so by their utter ignorance of God. What mattered it, if, to reach

them, she traveled in springless carts, on horseback, or struggled many miles on foot? They were suffering members of the Mystical Body of our crucified Lord, and she loved them. From time to time, her health gave way and she had to rest, but as soon as she was allowed up she was off again.

To the members of the charities in each town and village she gave simple instructions on their duties and responsibilities, taught them home nursing, including what precautions to take against contagion. Her simple eloquence attracted the men who concealed themselves in the meeting room to listen to her.

APPRECIATED AND WELCOMED

She compiled a little catechism and gathered the children around her wherever she went. Finding good school mistresses was a great anxiety. She endeavored to leave one in every town, and her lady friends helped her considerably. Besides visiting and encouraging the confraternities already functioning, Louise erected many more. In some places, she met with opposition, but generally she was appreciated and welcomed.

At Beauvais, in 1633, her visit ended in a public manifestation of gratitude. The bishop, priests, and people gathered to see her off. When she was leaving, a small boy fell under the wheels of the clumsy vehicle in which she was traveling and was thought to be dead. Louise sprang out of the carriage and, kneeling beside the seemingly lifeless little body, prayed so fervently that, to everyone's astonishment, he arose perfectly uninjured.

Before five years were up, the court and every parish of importance had its Confraternity of Charity. Abuses crept in sometimes. A few women got their help to prepare the food and sent them to the sick instead of serving them personally.

Saint Vincent strongly disapproved saying, "They hadn't the touch—these paid servants."

Then came an epidemic of plague. Many women were forbidden by their husbands or their parents, to run the risk of contagion. In fact, those who could, fled from Paris, while Louise calmly continued her charitable work and visited even the plague-stricken.

To fill the gaps left by the frightened women, Vincent and Louise decided to invite some of the young country women they had met in the villages. These young

women, would, without wishing to be nuns, willingly give themselves to God to serve Him in the poor. More than a dozen came eagerly. Louise gave them a hurried course of instruction, placed them in hired rooms under the care of the woman president of each parish confraternity, and hoped for the best. She got it!

Although some proved unsuitable and were sent home, others were excellent and soon Saint Vincent was in admiration at their devotedness.

To give just one example: Marguerite Nasseau (who had taught herself to read while minding her sheep and then braved the ridicule of her elders by teaching other girls) had skimmed her own meager fare to save money enough to help penniless young students to follow their vocation. She came to Saint Vincent and offered her services to nurse the sick. Everyone loved her because there was nothing in her that was not lovable, he said. After serving satisfactorily in three different parishes, she caught the plague from a poor woman whom she brought to her little room and put into her own bed. Then she walked to the hospital, where Louise found her, dying—the first Daughter of Charity.

BIRTH OF COMMUNITY

Scattered as they were in different parishes of Paris, with very little experience, and left to their own resources except for orders received from the Lady of Charity over each, these young peasant women could never persevere if something were not done to stabilize the venture. Louise de Marillac was quick to realize this and offered to receive a certain number into her house and to educate and train them for the service of the poor.

Saint Vincent, too, judged it necessary to unite these women in a community under the guidance of a superior—and here was one at hand of consummate prudence, exemplary piety, and of an ardent and indefatigable zeal.

The Community of the Daughters of Charity dates its birth from 29 November 1633 when Saint Louise welcomed the first four, whose names, unfortunately, are unknown to us.

To suit them, she somewhat changed her Order of the Day. There was to be no office, but half an hour's mental prayer morning and evening, examinations of conscience, periods of recollection and acts of the Presence of God, vocal prayers in common, daily Mass in the parish church, frequent Holy Communion, and the Rosary said privately.

She joined them at meals, recreation, and housework; she instructed them in all phases of their life and took them with her to visit the homes of the sick.

Saint Vincent watched and approved. He was most devoted to the interests of the Little Company and came at least once a fortnight to give them encouragement and instruction. After the second of these conference, notes were taken, at first by Saint Louise and later by one or another of the sisters capable of doing so.

With Saint Vincent's permission, Louise made a vow on 25 March 1634 to consecrate herself to the service of the poor, at the same time renewing her vow of chastity. By this time, there were twelve girls under instruction.

TRUE VOCATION

From the start Saint Vincent insisted, in his humility, that God alone could be truly called the Founder of the Community. He never thought of it, neither did Mademoiselle. She, in her turn, realized that she had at last found her true vocation—a religious life, hitherto quite unforeseen, living in community, yet working in the midst of the world, with much coming and going in succoring the poor, the ignorant, and the afflicted.

For fear of the sisters being considered nuns, which would mean enclosure and no more service of the poor in their own homes, all terminology associated with the cloister was avoided. Instead of a convent it was to be a house; instead of Reverend Mother it would be Sister Servant. The novitiate was to be the seminary and the Mistress of Novices would be the Sister Directress.

The little sisters were not to wear a veil like nuns; the simple grey costume and white headdress of the peasant women of the time suited nicely and was made uniform.

Until his death in 1660, Saint Vincent continued the conferences. If he happened to be out of Paris, his faithful friend and first disciple, Father Portail, supplied for him, but this was rare.

As for Louise, she was always there, giving herself by her example to the formation of these young sisters, whom she dearly loved, with a spiritual energy that was almost miraculous.

TEACHING AND SERVICE

When she was satisfied that they understood all that such a vocation required, two or three were sent to live in the town, near the little schoolroom where they taught peasant children and shepherdesses. Often they had only a hired room for lodging and, after hearing Mass in the parish church, they sallied forth to school or to serve the poor in their homes. After school there were household chores—sewing, mending, washing, and chopping firewood. Some made preserves for the poor, others attended to the doctor's orders for the next day's round of visits. Those who were illiterate were given extra time to learn how to read. Louise insisted on daily study, saying, "You must prepare yourselves in every way to become better servants of the poor. We are all they have and nothing is too good for our lords and masters.

Their religious formation went on constantly. Every fortnight they gathered either in Louise's house or in Saint Lazare, for Monsieur Vincent's conferences. Their numbers steadily increased.

Louise de Marillac, with other Ladies of Charity, visited the Hotel-Dieu, an immense hospital where there were almost 3000 patients. They did not have 3000 beds, for we are told there were sometimes six in a bed! It is difficult nowadays, to imagine a hospital in such dire straits as to have insufficient sheets for changing.

Soon four sisters were regularly at work there and the work was colossal because so many other essentials were lacking. Besides corporal assistance, the women instructed the patients and prepared them for the Sacraments. During this first year nearly 800 infidels, heretics, and even Turks, were reconciled to God. Louise was so devoted to this work that Saint Vincent had to restrain her zeal.

By 1636, it was necessary to move to a larger house in La Chapelle, a northern suburb of Paris.

This became the Mother House. A few visiting sisters were left to carry on their work in the city house.

Hardly were they installed in their country house, enjoying the pure fresh air, than war threatened. They were on the direct route of the invading and defending armies. Thousands of refugees poured into the village. Louise found herself and her sisters in a dangerous position, but she held her ground, trusting in the protection of God, and took in a number of girls who were among the refugees. To help them materially and to protect them were not sufficient for her zeal; she arranged for one of the missionaries to give them a retreat before they left.

PLIGHT OF FOUNDLINGS

The foundlings next attracted her attention. She heard of poor unfortunate abandoned babies deserted in the streets of Paris—300 or 400 a year—and her motherly heart went out to them. She went to see La Couche, a house to which these waifs were taken. It was kept by a woman with two servants who treated the children so badly that most of them died unbaptized. The survivors were sold to any beggar for a few pence, who maimed them to excite compassion. Louise was heartbroken and immediately begged Saint Vincent to let her take as many as she could accommodate. The Sisters of La Chapelle received them gladly. We hear of a sister sitting up all night with a baby in each arm because all the cots were full.

Their numbers increased so rapidly during the war that a foundling hospital was opened and run by the Sisters in Paris for some and others were boarded out with foster-mothers.

Providing for these little ones was, for years, one of Saint Louise's greatest difficulties. As they grew up, she also had to educate them. To meet the growing demand for teachers, she sent some of the sisters to the Ursuline Nuns, who initiated them into their method of teaching.

The Ladies of Charity were of great assistance to Saint Louise. In fact, without them, she could not have done a fraction of what she did.

DEATH OF MADAME GOUSSAULT

Her charitable enterprises required enormous sums of money, which was contributed almost entirely by the good Ladies, who also devoted themselves whole-heartedly to her works. Foundations were made on their country estates and financed by them. Madame Goussault was a wonderful example to the others, always ready to help either in visiting the Hotel-Dieu and the prisons or in caring for the foundlings. Her premature death in 1639 was a sore trial to Louise, who had relied so much on her. It was some consolation to know that to Saint Vincent she said, the day before she died, "All night I have seen the Daughters of Charity before the Throne of God. Ah, how greatly they will be multiplied; what good they will do and what happiness will be theirs."

Some of the Ladies expressed a wish to make spiritual retreats under Louise's direction. At Saint Vincent's suggestion she readily complied, all the more so as this gave her an opportunity to make them some return.

Saint Louise never neglected what she deemed her first duty—the training of the sisters who now formed a numerous community. They were taught to have no cell but a hired room, no cloister but the streets of the city or the wards of a hospital, no enclosure but obedience, no grating but the fear of God, and no veil but holy modesty. At the same time they were to equal cloistered religious in all the virtues of the religious life, adding thereto a great love for and absolute devotedness to the poor. The secret of her success in training her young girls was that she gave them daily heroic examples of every precept she explained.

NURSING THE PLAGUE-STRICKEN

Madame Goussault's dying wish was to see the sisters manage the Hospital of Angers in her native town, for which she left a large sum of money. This was the first long-distance foundation. Seventy-five miles from Paris was a great journey in those days, partly by coach and partly by canal boat. Louise picked her sisters carefully and decided to accompany them. She also made an effort to discard her widow's weeds and adopt the head-dress worn by her companions, but she caught cold and had to revert to her black veil. The journey to Angers took fourteen days and, when they arrived, Louise was seriously ill. Yet, she attended to all the business of the Foundation and established the Association of the Ladies of Charity. The plague was raging, but the sisters fearlessly nursed the plague-stricken and God preserved them from contagion.

Six years later the administrators of another large hospital asked the sisters to assume charge. This was in Nantes, farther off than Angers. Again Louise installed her Sisters personally. Before long, difficulties crowded in from all sides, and several times the Sisters' Council in Paris was at the point of withdrawing them. Eventually their patience and charity won over, though it took several years.

RULES ARE WRITTEN

In 1642 there were nearly one hundred members in the little company. Some of the sisters begged Saint Vincent to allow them to make vows. After much deliberation

he consented that they make vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and service of the poor, which would become, and remain, annual, although each one's intention must be to renew them every year until death.

Those so privileged pronounced their first holy vows on the Feast of the Annunciation, 25 March, and Louise renewed hers at the same time.

She kept reminding Saint Vincent that so far the Sisters had no written rule. Her order of the day and little regulations, but above all her example had sufficed. Being overwhelmed with problems of his own at the time, he put her off; but early in 1645 he was frightened into action when Louise collapsed and her life was despaired of. Eventually she recovered and then he became dangerously ill, even unconscious for several days. As soon as he was able, he asked Louise to draw up rules for the future guidance of the community. This she did with such wisdom and foresight that he had very few alterations to make. These rules have stood the test of time and are still faithfully observed by thousands of Daughters of Charity in all parts of the world. In the conferences that followed Saint Vincent explained the rules minutely and he loved to repeat, "Keep your Rules and your Rules will keep you."

It was now five years since Louise had transferred her Seminary and Secretariat to a larger house near the parish church of Saint Laurent. Saint Vincent was nearer. The Ladies of Charity held their meetings there and retreats for the sisters and for the laity were also conducted there. Louise was the life and soul of the house. In spite of her continual infirmities and sometimes overpowering anxieties, she was constantly cheerful and would laugh heartily at recreation with the sisters. When death snatched one of them from her, she wept bitterly, so much did she love them.

Louise's humility was her outstanding virtue. She did the meanest work of the house and never allowed anything new to be bought for her. She considered secondhand clothing quite good enough.

Her spirit of obedience made her seek advice from Saint Vincent on every point and to obey him implicitly.

The secrets of her interior life are revealed in the instructions she gave so regularly to the Daughters. These were taken down by her secretary verbatim, and we have them today as inspiring as the day she spoke. Full of common sense and forthrightness, one feels that she has had personal experience of the crosses and snares for which she sought to prepare them.

Her devotion to the Sacred Heart was remarkable. She lived before Saint Margaret Mary, who was born in 1647; yet a large picture painted by her represents the Lord

of Charity standing in the attitude we are now so accustomed to see on pictures of the apparition to Saint Margaret, which occurred many years later. Her second characteristic devotion was to the Immaculate Conception; in which she firmly believed long before it was declared an article of faith. To her Guardian Angel she was most devout; and always saluted the angels of the inhabitants of the towns and villages she passed through on her journeys. She recommended the Sisters to pray to the good angels of those whom they strove to instruct or convert. Her devotion to the Sacred Passion and to the Blessed Sacrament sustained her all through life amid innumerable trials, sorrows, and sufferings of body and soul. These devotions are now incorporated into the spiritual exercises of the Daughters of Charity.

GOD'S WATCHFUL CARE

Louise had great confidence in Divine Providence. She told the sisters that if they were not already called Daughters of Charity, they might well be called Daughters of Providence—so often had the good God shown His watchful care of them.

In 1644 she narrowly escaped death from a falling ceiling in the community room, when a joist broke, immediately after she had left the room.

On another occasion a sister was climbing the stairs of a tenement house with food for a sick woman, when the house collapsed, killing thirty-six people. The corner of the landing on which she stood was the only part left intact. After carefully lowering her soup-pot at the end of a rope, she jumped from the window into blankets held out to catch her and then went on her way to the poor with her basket still on her arm!

When Saint Vincent pleaded the cause of his beloved galley slaves, Louise sent sisters to nurse them, with detailed instructions, warning them of the risks they ran due to the evil character of these poor men. She advised that they, "Be like the sun whose rays fall on the dung-heap without suffering any ill effects from it."

A large dilapidated castle—Bicetre—was placed at her disposal by the Ladies of Charity in 1647. The foundlings were housed there and a wine-press and bakery were started, but civil war broke out. As in 1636, the sisters and children were in danger. Two years later, all had to return to Paris.

These foundlings caused Louise an incredible amount of worry. The number of children to be fed, housed, and clothed was out of proportion to the funds collected for them.

Between 1638 and 1643, 1200 infants had been cared for, yet they kept coming at an average of one a day. The sisters at the Foundling Hospital reduced their own fare to one meal a day. There were so many other things to worry about that the ladies' enthusiasm for the foundlings flagged and Louise tearfully told Saint Vincent that she feared they would have to give up the care of the little ones.

Saint Vincent called a meeting and made his famous appeal, "Ladies, if you continue to support these little ones, they will live. If you abandon them, they will die. Pronounce sentence. Their life and death are in your hands. What is your verdict?"

Of course, the ladies promised to continue. They even sold their jewelry to raise funds. However, with the outbreak of war many of the ladies fled to the country. The fortunes of the few remaining were so reduced that they were unable to redeem their promises. Louise was left alone to shoulder the burden of hundreds of little hungry children. Debts mounted. Credit was refused. The little ones were dying of hunger and poor Louise felt personally responsible for their deaths. To make matters worse, Saint Vincent was away for five or six months, but he answered her sad letters, reminding her of the confidence she owed God. The work was His. He would see it through. And so He did, through His worthy instrument, Saint Vincent, who, on his return, managed to procure food, paid all debts, and averted the dreaded disaster within a few months.

NURSING THE WOUNDED IN WAR

There came a bit of happiness to Louise in 1650. Her wayward son, now thirty-seven years of age, who found it so hard to settle down anywhere or at any job, met and married Gabrielle le Clerc, an excellent young lady, under whose influence he became steady and reliable. They had one daughter, Louise, who was a great joy to her grandmother.

Three days after her son's marriage France was again plunged into a senseless war of tragic suffering. Country districts were laid waste by the marching and counter-marching of troops. The horrors perpetrated by bandits admitted into the Queen's army were unimaginable.

Louise was deluged with appeals for help. Sisters were wanted everywhere. Famine was widespread. Sorrowfully she saw four sisters depart for the battlefield at the Queen's request, to nurse the wounded. Three of them died. Soon there was fighting in the very capital. Soldiers lay dead at the door of the Mother House, while the

sisters inside fasted and prayed for peace. Prayer succeeded where all political efforts failed. The archbishop appealed for prayer and penance. Peace came with the return of young King Louis XIV at the end of 1652.

At the same time Poland was at war with Sweden. The Queen of Poland, who had been a Lady of Charity in Paris, asked for sisters to nurse the wounded soldiers in her adopted country. Three sisters were sent in 1652 and more in 1657. Two died of plague and Louise was asked for reinforcements. In all, she sent twenty sisters to Poland, envying them their opportunities for sacrifice.

As a result of the war, and long before it was over, begging in the streets of Paris became a menace. There were about 100,000 professional beggars. Many edicts had been issued against them and weapons of force had been resorted to, but all in vain.

In 1656 King Louis XIV erected a general hospital, which before long housed 6000 mendicants, all learning a trade. Street begging was again forbidden by law. It was remarkable how many maimed and blind beggars were cured overnight and either came willingly to learn a trade or disappeared into the country. A Paris merchant donated 100,000 livres for work, which was to be administered by Saint Vincent, Saint Louise, and the daughters.

CARE OF LUNATICS

The following year, 1653, the Holy Name of Jesus Hospice was founded for the sick and aged of the capital.

Two years later this valiant woman, now worn out with age and infirmities, welcomed yet another major appointment—the care of lunatics in an asylum that had been rather badly managed. Saint Vincent inspired the sisters with such an exalted idea of the grace God bestowed on them by giving them this charitable work that they all longed to devote themselves to it in spite of its special difficulties.

In 1658 the River Seine overflowed its banks and Paris was inundated. Louise harbored 800 refugees in the Mother House and fed 1500 poor at the door each day. Saint Vincent organized a huge emporium of food, clothing, furniture, and medical supplies, while several sisters helped the priests and brothers who were sent to relieve distress in the country districts.

So, the last years of Louis's life were no less fruitful in good works than the preceding years. Like them, these years also bore the stamp of the Cross. Trials of all

kinds came her way—ill health, disappointments, losses—but with them all came ever-increasing sanctity. Her will was anchored to the Will of God and, consequently, she enjoyed that peace which Our Lord promised that no man can take it from you.

A fall injured one arm permanently in 1659. The injury aggravated her sufferings and necessitated a sister secretary. From her sick room she sent sisters to Calais to nurse the wounded and other people attacked by plague. Two died and twenty volunteered to replace them.

PREPARING FOR THE END

During these last years of her life Louise had an assistant to whom she left most of the administration of the Mother House. No longer able to cope with it all, she spent more time in prayer and preparation for the end, which she felt was drawing near. The prayers and sacrifices of their mother certainly obtained extraordinary graces for her children.

Her last foundation was that of Narbonne in 1659, where the archbishop asked for three teaching sisters.

Louise was no longer able to assist at daily Mass and was suffering intensely. Twelve years before this, Saint Vincent had written of her to Father Portail in Rome saying, "I regard Mademoiselle as naturally dead for the last ten years . . . only God knows the strength of her soul."

January and February were anxious months for her daughters. Their mother lay between life and death. On 4 February the Last Sacraments were administered. She rallied sufficiently to put all her affairs in order. On the 14th, news of the death of Father Portail saddened her. He had been the sisters' Spiritual Director for eighteen years.

Early in March her fever returned and gangrene declared itself in her injured shoulder. She was in danger and on the 12th she again received the Last Sacraments. Three days of increasing pain followed, but her patience was uncompromising. It is just, she whispered, that where sin has abounded, suffering should also abound.

Saint Vincent, now over eighty, was practically an invalid. His ulcerated leg made it impossible for him to walk any distance. He was quite unable to assist her. She asked for a few written words of encouragement, but, knowing her detachment, he

sent an oral message instead, "You are going before me, Mademoiselle, but I hope to see you soon in heaven."

At eleven o'clock on the 15th, feeling that her last hour had come, she spoke her dying words to the sobbing sisters who surrounded her bed, "Take great care of the poor . . . live together in great union and cordiality . . . pray much to the Blessed Virgin, she is your only Mother.

At noon her beautiful soul passed peacefully to God. It was Monday of Passion Week, 15 March 1660.

She left 350 Daughters of Charity in seventy foundations in France and Poland.

SAINT VINCENT'S WORDS

A few weeks after her death Saint Vincent, somewhat improved in health, held a conference with her daughters. After listening to them tell of her virtues and her tender devotion to the poor, he said, "Address yourselves with confidence to your Mother in heaven. She can help you more now and she will, provided you are faithful to God."

Fourteen years before, when sending her a draft copy of the memorandum of the establishment of the Daughters, which he intended to send to the Archbishop of Paris, he wrote, "I have omitted many things I might have said about yourself. Let us leave it to Our Lord to say it to the whole world one day, and let us hide ourselves in the meantime."

Surely, that day did come and Our Lord called the attention of the whole world to Saint Louise de Marillac in the twentieth century.

Her Cause was not introduced until 1895.

In 1911 Pope Saint Pius X declared her Venerable. In 1920 Pope Benedict XV beatified her. In 1934 Pope Pius XI canonized her.

In 1954 her statue was erected in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome.

On 14 March 1960, Pope John XXIII declared her to be Patroness of all Christian Social Workers.

Did she not inaugurate, more than 300 years ago, those same works that now claim the time and zeal of modern social workers?

Mothers, fathers, Catholic youth, religious and lay teachers and nurses, and members of every branch of social work, Saint Louise de Marillac is your model. Look to her for inspiration. Put your efforts under her guidance and protection, and pray that your work may resemble hers, especially in this—that in all she did for the needy and oppressed she sought only the Glory of God—and the salvation of souls.

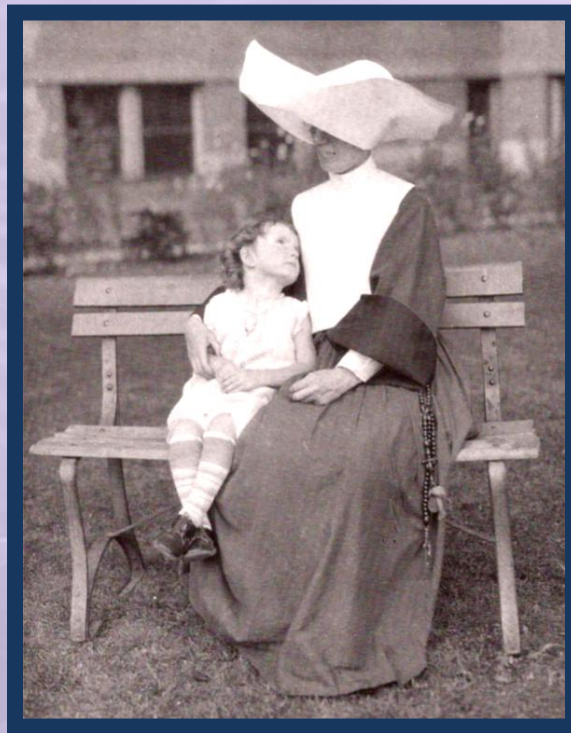
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